

## Joyce

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:01:05.0] Hello and welcome to Employer Zone Insights, a Community Care podcast where we speak to social workers and senior leaders about practice, training and how their experiences are shaping how they offer support to families, adults and children.

In this episode we speak to Tim Aldridge, corporate director of children's services at the London Borough of Newham, and Joyce, a social worker in the children and young people's service, as the council continues on its improvement journey. Newham's children's services were inspected by Ofsted in February 2019. The inspection resulted in an inadequate rating for services, and since then there have been subsequent monitoring visits showing positive signs of improvement and that the service has delivered a well-coordinated response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In this episode, Tim and Joyce share their insights into the council's improvement journey, and with the stabilisation of their senior leadership team the council is reshaping its practice model and delivering positive improvements to staff's work-life balance.

Welcome, Tim and Joyce.

Tim, if I could start with you. Newham recently underwent a focused visit in which Ofsted recorded improvements in such areas as the quality and timeliness of assessments, progress with permanency planning and strong partnerships working in response to Covid, as well as staff saying they felt really supported. Can you tell us briefly why and how this improvement plan was developed, and the positives you've seen so far?

Tim Aldridge: [0:01:49.4] Hi. Yes. Really pleased with the findings from the Ofsted inspection. And as you say in your question, in particular the strength of that partnership response to Covid-19. As you're aware, Newham is one of the most deprived areas of London. It was hit really hard in the first wave of Covid-19. And despite the fact, as you say, there are a number of challenges that we are experiencing going through an improvement journey, I'm incredibly proud of the amazing efforts of practitioners across children's social care but also that work across the partnership, really close working

relationships across that partnership and a really, I think, proactive and robust response to support the most vulnerable.

And I think the other key finding of that focused visit was we're now an organisation that knows ourself well. So we knew where our strengths were, where we'd made those improvements already, but also where those areas are that we need focus on further.

I think, as you say, the staff, I think, gave a really positive response to inspectors in terms of what their day-to-day experience is and how the local authority have managed the context of Covid-19, but also the issues that have been raised through Black Lives Matter.

And as you say, we've taken a really positive step forwards in terms of setting out an ambitious model of practice, and we put plans in place that are realistic, that are sharply focused, in order to continue this improvement journey.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:03:42.5] And can you tell us about the practice model that is used in Newham?

Tim Aldridge: Yeah. So it's our ambition to be, you know, a centre of excellence for social work practice. Newham is this amazingly exciting place to be. It's dynamic, it's diverse. Yes, there are huge challenges in terms of levels of need in the community. But there is an amazing opportunity here in Newham to make a difference.

And the way in which we are making a difference is that unrelenting focus on the quality of practice with families, with children and young people. And that's based on, as you say, this systemic approach which is all about understanding the child, the young person within the context of the wider family, of the wider community, and really thinking carefully about how we frame and use language to understand the experiences of those individuals and families, and how we help to change the family's experience, the family's understanding, the behaviour amongst that family one conversation at a time. So we are absolute believers in the power of that individual practitioner relationship to support families to make positive change, and I think it's that sense of hope which is absolutely critical to all that we do in Newham.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:05:17.0] And I know that in the past we've spoken about this back-to-basics strategy, so I'm interested to know how this approach manifests in that.

Tim Aldridge: [0:05:26.4] Yeah. So I mean, I think it's one thing to have a conceptual framework. It's another thing to actual convert that into a set of tools, a way of going about practice that makes sense to practitioners but also makes sense to families. And the way we've broken that down is twofold.

Firstly, everything we do – so those practice fundamentals that you mentioned – everything we do is all about how we remain purposeful, planned and focused. And we do that through a way of working with families that aligns with the practice framework, which is our six Cs. It's about being compassionate; it's about working with and coproducing; it's about being curious, so exercising professional curiosity; it's been really Clear about what we're trying to achieve; it's managing risk with confidence; and it's about understanding the wider community context. So those six Cs, that PPF model, that's central to all we're doing.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:06:39.3] Okay, great. I think this is time for Joyce to put some flesh on the bones. Joyce, I know you've been working at the council for around three years in different departments. How has this back-to-basics approach helped you in your practice?

Joyce: [0:06:57.2] Hi. I think for me, and for most social workers, it's the fact that we're having targeted training, taking despite our learning for – I'll speak for myself – in terms of our learning through graduate programming, coming and doing our ASYE within Newham. It's the training, the fundamental training. I found that very helpful because it took me back to looking at things in bite-sized chunks and being able to focus in terms of if, for instance, you're working with a family. You're looking at it systemically but you're also focusing your practice on what you think is essential and beneficial to the family, and that has really helped.

We've also looked at systemic approach and, for instance, I just started my systemic training within Newham, and that's helping me to understand how to work within the framework that we're working in. That has helped for me to build relationships with other workers and to risk assess systemically, not just focus on what our agency needs but also working with health, mental health, school – how can we best support a child.

I think if I give you, like, for instance, an example of a case which I just did an assessment on recently, where the young person was at risk of exclusion and likely vulnerabilities to criminal exploitation. Being mindful around the environment that we have in Newham and the high risks around complex safeguarding, it was helpful to have that training which gave me the confidence at certain meetings to challenge school where I felt that school

could do more to support the family, and also have that honest discussion with parents and challenge certain things but within a respectful manner and in a manner where they don't feel like they have to be defensive about their parenting, but also acknowledging the difficulties to raise a young person in Newham for any parent, especially if they're entering into adolescence.

And the services that we have within the team, for instance, I had a systemic consultation with this case where we explored the hypotheses and the issues around that, and that helped me to inform a plan for this family, where it turned out in the end, after having a meeting with parents and school, with a collaborative approach in dealing with the behavioural issues and the concerns that were there, that they didn't need statutory intervention, and this weaves into the effect that if that work is done we might not end up having as many caseloads as we do, or we used to do before.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:09:34.5] Okay. That's an interesting point. So what's happened to the caseload numbers now?

Joyce: [0:09:39.5] When I first came to Newham as an ASYE, in the intervention east team, for instance, we were holding about 26, 28 cases, senior practitioners, some as high as 30, and that's including court work. Now the cases have gone down to as little as fifteen. That was something that three years ago you could not think is possible in Newham. And there were always requests, 'Could we have a statement of how many cases we can hold?' But now, because there's been consistency in higher management, and that's what the drive is, basics, is being driven and drilled into us, and I think social workers are starting to see the reward of it in terms of lower caseloads, manageable caseloads, and supervision, and effective support from management. And that's coming from the consistency you get. So even though sometimes always new management comes and things change, but now we're starting to buy into it, and I can see even the ones who were not so much interested in the idea of change, or who had been in Newham for a long time and thought, 'This has always happened,' there is a change in that culture around accepting what is being sold to us, and we're buying into it.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:10:57.5] That's fantastic. Tim, can you speak to that as well, because to change a culture takes time, doesn't it?

Tim Aldridge: [0:11:04.5] Yeah, it does. And I can't put it better than the way Joyce has described it. I think what's absolutely critical is that we're clear about what we're trying to achieve and the way we're trying to achieve it. So that sense of aligned purpose is critical. And we know to set the right conditions for social work to flourish you've got to set the right climate. It's got to be that

equilibrium between support but also constructive challenge. And I hope I'm also recognising what Joyce has referred to, which is that sense of people, as Joyce says, starting to buy into this premise that if we provide support, if we provide clear direction, if we are really, really focused on the quality of practice, if we invest in the workforce, then we're going to start to see these really positive changes happen, and that becomes a sort of virtuous cycle where you get a range of benefits that then support each other.

So I think it is about having that stability because this business is all about the relationships. It's about being able to listen, being able to sort of take the time to explain what we're trying to achieve, but also being willing to be flexible and to respond to feedback, and I think that's very much what we're trying to achieve, is that more positive, relational context in which a great practice can be supported.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:12:44.2] Absolutely. And I know from the Ofsted report, strong partnerships working in response to Covid was one of your strengths that was highlighted, and I know that Joyce mentioned earlier about working with other partners. So in the case of the young child, working with schools, that kind of thing. So it's just interesting to know how Newham has facilitated that collaborative way of working.

Tim Aldridge: [0:13:08.7] Yeah. And I think what was flagged in that 2019 Ofsted report that you referred to was the challenges in partnership working, and clearly we've had the new safeguarding partnerships that started rolling out in the autumn of last year. We took that as an opportunity to really reset some of the working relationships between the key partners, including schools, health and the police. We worked really hard at it, and certainly throughout the Covid pandemic we worked incredibly hard. We had very regular communication, large numbers of conversations about, 'How do we identify and support the most vulnerable? And how do we work together?' And I think you do get that sense of out of adversity those relationships, that collaboration can really flourish. And I think it doesn't happen by accident. It's been a lot of really hard commitment from all of those different partners. And I think what we've been able to do it create that greater sense of coherence and alignment, and share that ambition to drive improvement. And I think we've done that through that real honesty, that ability, as Joyce mentioned, to have those more challenging conversations but do so in a constructive way.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:14:29.5] And Joyce, you mentioned earlier about the reduction in caseloads, which would have a positive impact on not just yourself but other social workers working in Newham. What other aspects of improved wellbeing can you talk about?

Joyce: [0:14:44.0] Well if you look at our supervision it's much more structured, and we went through this training around the fundamental training, where it taught me what I'm to expect from supervision and how I can be supported within that. And I think the key thing for me is the fact that we've seen that within the past twelve months we've had consistent managers who are supportive and they've stayed, and that stability has helped. So you build that relationship. As we are trying to build relationships with families, us at work to maintain our wellbeing, we're having those relationships with our managers, and that's helping us in terms of just feeling stable. And even though the caseloads might be challenging, because of the barrel we find ourselves in, but that support is robust and it's focused, and we're able to just get in touch with a manager if you need to, and just have that discussion and clear directions in terms of how you can proceed with a case. That's been really helpful.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:15:48.1] And in terms of career progression, are there particular areas you feel you will definitely get support from Newham in doing?

Joyce: [0:15:56.2] Yeah. I've been lucky enough to have, from my ASYE, to have a manager that really could see where my strengths were, could see the areas that I needed improvement in, and that was throughout my supervision, my ASYE, and continuing now as I've just moved teams and joined an assessment team. It's really helped to have that identification of where I want to go. For instance, I'm going to start doing my practice educator training by September. I've started doing my systemic training at the moment. I feel like in Newham, for me, the sky's the limit. If I want to get into management there's aspiring management training which is there, in place. So I don't feel like my growth is stifled. If anything it's encouraged, and constant conversations are being held with myself in terms of, 'Where do you want to go? What do you want to do?' And even if I'm worried about something I can go and say, 'This is the area I want to end up. How can I get there?' I've been supported for instance, Theresa Reed, who works in our development team, I had a strong conversation with her a couple of weeks ago about where we're going now, 'This is where I want to be, here now,' and that's helped. That's really helping.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:17:15.2] Brilliant. And I'm sure because of everyone working remotely that's even more important, to be communicating and supporting staff, Tim?

Tim Aldridge: [0:17:26.2] Yeah, I think so. I think certainly when we were...we took some time to reflect on our sort of journey over the last few months. You're absolutely right. This pandemic's thrown so many different challenges at us and we've had to adapt to this virtual world quicker than we could ever have imagined. What we've done, I have a weekly director's question time, where

all staff are invited to meet with me and the key directors across children's services, and it's a chance really to listen, to reflect, to provide updates, but also to honestly share both things that we're proud of but also vulnerabilities, 'cause I think it's so important during this time. We're able to share not only our strengths but also the things that we're struggling with, and by me being able to do that, I think it gives permission to others to do the same.

So I think that regular communication is even more important than it would be if we were all back in the office. But it is that sort of value base of, I think, being more accessible as a leader, but also being open to honest feedback from colleagues. I think we have to have a culture and an approach that real integrity and authenticity. I think that's critical.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:18:52.1] Yeah. And it reminds me of something that you've said in the past just regarding change, and this idea that change takes time and you're in it for the long-haul, and this idea that you require buy-in from everyone and it is important to be honest. And you said 'and authentic'. Even if there are challenges I think sometimes there might be a risk that people want to hide behind those issues and not be authentic about the challenges that they're facing. So it's really good that the approach that Newham's taking is to be upfront and open about the fact that they don't necessarily know everything and they're working in partnership with everyone to get there.

Tim Aldridge: [0:19:34.7] Yeah. No, thank you. And I suppose my reflection on that point is, I don't know if Joyce remembers but when I arrived in Newham just over a year ago I said, 'Look, big organisations take a long time to make significant changes. If you want to transform the culture, the quality of what we deliver, that takes time.' I absolutely believe in that sense that everyone needs to be more or less on the same page. And the values that we talk about in terms of the work we do with our families, they have to be reflected back inside the organisation. So we have to be true to those values in everything that we do across our professional lives, and it's just as important that we have those strong, honest relationships with the people we work with as it is with the client group, the customers, families that we work with.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:20:33.9] Yes, absolutely. So basically what are the next steps on this journey, this improvement journey, Tim?

Tim Aldridge: [0:20:41.7] Well we put together a lot of the building blocks. So I talked earlier about, you know, knowing ourselves better, so we've got a really strong practice assurance framework, we've got the social care academy, we've got the systemic clinical team that's been developed, and we've got our model of practice. So I think they're some of our key building blocks. The absolutely

critical pieces moving forwards are firstly, staying true to the purposeful, planned and focused approach. So being really sharp in the things that we focus on next.

The second is that investment in the workforce. So Joyce, I'm really pleased to hear, is getting some of the benefit of that. But we absolutely know, to be successful moving forward it's about valuing, appreciating and investing in our workforce.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:21:33.1] And Joyce, tell us how you feel the transition from how things were before to now, how you feel about working in Newham now.

Joyce: [0:21:41.9] I feel confidence in my practice. That's down to support, training and getting to understand the basics of practising social work. I feel supported. I think I've mentioned that before! But yes, I feel supported. I feel very confident. I feel comfortable in Newham and I am mindful that it's still a journey. There are still areas we need to improve. But I'm confident that it continues to go at the pace it's going, Newham is a fantastic place to work. I [unclear – 0:22:18.7] into it. So I'm loving my place. I'm loving Newham right now. And yeah, I really feel comfortable in Newham. I would recommend people who want to come and work in Newham to try it, to give it a try. It's a really good place to work. The caseloads are manageable, the workload is manageable and there is support. And I think for any social worker those are the fundamental things that you really want. So I'm really happy.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:22:46.1] And you've had a breadth of learning, you've been in different services, have you?

Joyce: [0:22:51.5] Yes. I did my final placement in the LARK team, did my ASYE in Intervention, and now I'm in Assessment, because that's always what I made clear at the beginning that I always wanted to take the first three to four years to go through the child's journey, to get an understanding of every service before I placed my roots in a service eventually. And I've been lucky that I've had really good managers. My ASYE manager, Regis, she taught me the basics and she was very specific of expectations of social workers' understanding of risk and assessment, and ensuring that the children are safe, but also supporting the family as a whole, and that's really taken me forward in my professional identity. So I'm still growing. 'I'm still a baby in social work,' I still say to other people, but I'm really having a great time.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:23:51.8] That's fantastic. I don't know, Tim, if there's anything else you'd like to say in terms of final words?



Tim Aldridge: [0:23:59.4] Oh, just how lucky we are to have so many fantastic people working for Newham already, and great to hear that Joyce has had a positive experience. And I think really, yeah, this is all about how we invest in that practice development. Newham is never going to be an easy place to come and work. It's got huge challenges, but you can have a massive, massive impact if you come and work in Newham. And it's a place that will stretch you but it's also a place that will support you and provide that investment in your career. And you know, social work is all about bringing hope to children, to families, hope of change, hope of that potential to make positive change. And I think that's what myself and the team have wanted to bring to Newham, that hope that there can be a positive change for the way that we deliver social care services.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:24:56.2] Well we wish you all the success on your improvement journey, and we will be following on your success as you move forward. So thank you so much for your time, both of you, and thanks for listening to Employer Zone Insight, which is a Community Care podcast. We'll be sharing more podcast episodes in the new year, so please visit us at [www.communitycare.co.uk](http://www.communitycare.co.uk).  
Bye.